

LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH
29 MARCH 1982

Anxious CIA acts to keep its Mexican contact out of court

By IAN BALL in New York

THE CIA and Justice Department have stepped into a case pending in San Diego because one suspect, the former chief of Mexico's Directorate of Federal Security, was a key American intelligence source.

The CIA has sought to block his prosecution, partly as an "old boy network" gesture and partly to avoid exposing sensitive intelligence connections throughout Central America.

The official, Senor Miguel Nassar Haro, who had headed the Mexican security agency since 1977, is a suspect in a fencing operation involving some £4,490,000 worth of stolen cars.

After being stolen in the United States the cars were driven across the Mexican border where buyers pay almost three times the price they fetch in America.

Calls monitored

One intelligence source described Senor Nassar as the CIA's "most important man in Mexico and Central America."

As head of an agency which routinely monitored the movements and telephone calls of guerrilla leaders from El Salvador and Guatemala—anti-American revolutionaries using Mexico City as a base for their international operations—he was in a position to funnel an immense amount of information on clandestine activity to Washington.

"We knew he was no angel but you don't have much choice," a senior American law-enforcement official was quoted as saying.

He added: "You can't tell the Mexicans how to run their government. A lot of times we

don't like their methods but when you need information you take what you can get."

Another source, an official in the American intelligence community, said Senor Nassar had relayed sensitive information about Soviet and Cuban assistance to Central American guerrilla forces.

"The CIA's main worry all along has been potential damage to the institutional relationship," the official said in explaining why high-level efforts had been made to block the indictment in San Diego.

"It was Nassar's job, not Nassar, that mattered."

He added that the intelligence agency remained concerned about the case, despite Senor Nassar's departure from his job two months ago, because it feared publicity about co-operation between Mexican and American security agencies could force the Mexicans to limit their assistance.

Concern for victims

The case became public knowledge this weekend after Mr William Kennedy, the United States Attorney in San Diego, revealed in a newspaper interview that his superiors in the Justice Department had been blocking the prosecution.

In Washington Justice Department officials were furious over the decision of the San Diego prosecutor to "go public." They said his dismissal was under consideration. He was appointed last year by President Reagan.

In the interview Mr Kennedy acknowledged that the concerns of the CIA "must be factored in" but added: "I'm concerned about the victims, car owners or the insurance companies."

Evidence implicating Senor Nassar first appeared last year following the indictment of 28 Mexican suspects by a Federal Grand Jury in San Diego. Three of those indicted were with the Mexican security agency.

The members of the Mexican ring were charged with stealing nearly 600 cars in Southern California and transporting them south of the border. Fourteen of the suspects had been arrested in the United States and convicted.